SYNOPSIS OF

FOREST IN THE CITY:
CONTESTED INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS ON THE HILLS OF GUWAHATI

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INTRODUCTION

Informal settlements have become a matter of intense debate and activism in postcolonial cities, as slum residents push back against growing threats of eviction and displacement. These contestations around urban land and housing are symptomatic of the contradictions of development across the global South, where and governments have failed to provide adequate low-income housing and informality is deeply embedded in urban planning and land governance regimes (Roy 2009).

This thesis explores conflicts around an unusual type of urban informal settlement in a regional Indian city – settlements on the hills of Guwahati. Guwahati, Northeast India's largest city, has grown steadily since India's independence, both demographically and spatially. For many low-income migrants who come to the city from rural areas of the Northeast and other regions of India, seeking livelihoods or fleeing conflicts or natural disasters, the hills are among the few spaces where they can find space to settle down. However, environmental groups in Guwahati have blamed the proliferation of the hill settlements for environmental degradation, loss of forest cover, and frequent flooding. Categorized by the government as 'encroachments' on forest land, the settlements have been targeted by numerous eviction drives over the years (Desai and Mahadevia 2014; Mahadevia, Mishra, and Joseph 2017), provoking protests and anti-eviction movements (Mitra 2019). Many inhabitants who belong to tribal communities of Northeast India claim that as 'indigenous' people, they have a right to settle on the land. The thesis explores these tensions between concerns for environmental protection and nature conservation, on the one hand, and the rights and claims of the urban poor to housing and security of land tenure, on the other.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Across the global South, urbanization has been marked by the growth of informal settlements, or 'slums', which provide shelter mainly to the urban poor. The widespread adoption of neoliberal urban development policies by national, state and municipal governments since the 1990s has created pressure to 'free up' valuable urban land for real estate and infrastructure development (Goldman 2021; Roy and Ong 2011), often by displacing informal settlements. Middle-class demands for 'clean and green' cities have also led to violent evictions in major cities such as Delhi and Mumbai (Baviskar 2011). Slum residents have pushed back in various ways, such as by

participating in organized housing rights movements or through everyday negotiations with the state agencies and power brokers.

Chapter 2 presents a review of several bodies of literature that analyze conflicts around urban informal settlements in India and the global south (e.g., Caldeira 2017; Holston 2008; McFarlane 2008; Ren 2011), with a focus on environmental politics (e.g., Doshi 2019; Ghertner 2015; Rademacher 2009). Work on the strategies utilized by the urban poor to counter displacement for land and housing rights is also reviewed (e.g., Bayat 2000; Benjamin 2008; Chatterjee 2004; Doshi and Ranganathan 2016; Weinstein 2014). The review shows that most studies of informal settlements in India focus on urban slums in the major metro cities, while little research has been carried out on Tier-II cities such as Guwahati, or on settlements on 'forest' land on the urban fringe – gaps this thesis addresses.

Chapter 2 also includes a review of studies of the displacement and dispossession of tribal communities in India, especially because of restrictive forest laws (e.g.: Fernandes 2008; Kothari 1996). Finally, it discusses the politics of indigeneity and citizenship in Northeast India (e.g., Baruah 1999; Barbora 2005; Kimura 2005; Roy 2016), which provides the necessary background to the develop the argument of the thesis.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

The main objective of the research is to understand the conflicts around the hill settlements of Guwahati, the eviction drives stemming from environmental concerns, and the strategies employed by the hill settlers to challenge displacement. The specific research questions addressed are:

1. How did informal settlements emerge on the hills of Guwahati in the context of rapid urbanization and migration post-independence?
2. How have different state agencies dealt with these informal settlements in the hills and on forest land?
3. Why have the hill settlements been subjected to eviction, and how have the settlers responded to attempts to displace them?
4. What strategies have the hill settlers employed to assert their rights to land and to claim legitimate urban citizenship?
5. How have residents of informal settlements in Guwahati mobilized politically against threats of eviction?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the study, which is broadly located within the disciplinary framework of social anthropology, is centred on ethnographic field research combined with archival research. Field research was conducted in Guwahati from June 2018 to April 2019, in several hill settlements that have faced the threat of eviction and in a Dalit urban slum. The research methods employed included in-depth and open-ended qualitative interviews with the hill settlers, 'hanging around' in the field, observations of events and interactions, semi-structured interviews with key informants, and collection of official and unofficial documents and other material. Interviews and discussions were carried out mainly in Assamese. To gain a deeper understanding of Guwahati's recent history of urbanization, archival sources in the Assam State Archives were consulted.

In view of the sensitive nature of the research, the thesis anonymizes all personal and some place names, except where the information is already in the public domain. All precautions have been taken to protect the confidentiality, privacy and safety of the interlocutors and respondents and to ensure that the research findings and written outputs do not place anyone at risk.

KEY FINDINGS

The main research findings are presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the thesis. Chapter 1 provides the context for these body chapters by outlining the spatial and socio-political landscape of the study, situating Guwahati within the history and geography of Northeast India, and tracing the post-colonial formation and politics of the region in relation to the Indian state

Chapter 3, 'Exclusionary Urbanization in Post-Independence Guwahati', traces the history of the displacement of tribal communities in Guwahati in the post-independence period due to the initiation of several development projects requiring land. Demographic growth and spatial expansion were accompanied by a demographic shift, as the proportion of the tribal population declined. The chapter focuses on two developments that led to the alienation of tribal lands: the denotification of the South Kamrup (Guwahati) Tribal Belt and the establishment of the new capital complex at Dispur. This discussion shows that the pattern of urbanization in Guwahati from the 1950s was exclusionary (Kundu 2009), setting the stage for the ongoing land conflicts discussed in the subsequent chapters. The final section examines the wave of eviction notifications

that were issued across Assam in the 1960s, leading to the rise of anti-eviction movements led by Left parties.

Chapter 4, 'Environmental Politics and Land Struggles on Guwahati's Hills', focuses on the conflicts that erupted due to the notification of hill areas as forest lands and the creation of a wildlife sanctuary that encompassed several settlements. A case study is presented to show how hill settlements are established by migrants from tribal communities. The chapter then explores the contestations around the eviction drive in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and describes the strategies deployed by the settlers to stay in place. A case study of one settlement illustrates one such strategy – settlers mounted a legal challenge to the designation of the hill lands as 'forest' land. A second case depicts another key strategy, where settlers apply for regularization of their land holdings to secure tenurial rights. These examples also illustrate how the hill settlers invoke their 'indigenous' identity to claim land rights. The discussion shows that grey areas in land administration have compounded the threat of eviction, but also created channels for residents of informal settlements to resist eviction. The illegibility of the developmental state, and divergent interpretations of law and policy by government staff and local people, shape the real-life outcomes of such conflicts (Mathur 2016).

Chapter 5, 'Anti-eviction Mobilizations: Confrontations between Settlers and the State', describes another set of strategies that have been deployed to forestall evictions – organized anti-eviction movements and interventions. It focuses on two key actors in these struggles – Mahanagar Unnayan Samity (MUS), a Guwahati-based civil society organization, and Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a major peasant organization in Assam. The approach of MUS, whose members are drawn mainly from the urban middle class, is direct engagement with the state and government policies to address civic issues in Guwahati. In contrast, KMSS, whose membership is mainly from rural and agrarian groups, takes a more confrontational and aggressive approach to opposing eviction drives, at times linking the land question with the rights of the 'indigenous' people of Assam. The chapter also presents a contrasting case of a Dalit colony in the city threatened with eviction, to highlight how social identity affects the capacity of groups to make claims to land or settlement rights. The identity of residents of informal settlements (as tribal, 'indigenous', or 'outsider') also influences how state agencies respond to demands for land titles or resistance to eviction drives.

CONCLUSION

The thesis provides an ethnographic and historical account of land struggles in Guwahati since Indian independence, focusing on the informal hill settlements. The case of the hill settlement

brings together issues around urban informal settlements and the dispossession and displacement of tribal communities in India. By tracing how contestations over urban space unfold in a non-metropolitan city that is contiguous with forest spaces, the thesis contributes to the literature on the role of environmental politics in the marginalization of urban informal settlements in India and the global South, and on the strategies utilized by marginalized groups to make claims to urban space.

The research addresses the complexities of land governance that arise in the margins of the city when it expands by incorporating non-urban (agrarian and forest) areas. It focuses on the politics of a particular category of urban informal settlements – hill settlements located close to or within a large city but under the (contested) jurisdiction of the Forest Department. The thesis highlights how the complexities and contradictions of forest and land laws and policies in India contribute to the conflicts around these settlements. The thesis documents how hill settlers develop bureaucratic and legal strategies to contest eviction, as well as how anti-eviction struggles have been mobilized by political parties, civil society groups and peasant organizations. The changing response of tribal groups to their displacement, from passive exodus during the early post-independence period, to the more aggressive assertion of land rights based on their tribal identity from the 2000s, as well as the contrasting case of a Dalit slum, illustrate the how the broader ethnic and citizenship politics of Northeast India have shaped struggles around land and informal settlements.

The thesis has certain limitations because of the political situation in Assam during the fieldwork period. The tensions around the updating of the Nation Register of Citizens (NRC), and protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill at the time placed some restrictions on the fieldwork as well as access to government officials. In addition, the sensitivity of the issue of 'illegal' Bangladeshi migrants prevented the researcher from visiting hill settlements inhabited by Bengali Muslims. Despite these limitations, the thesis provides a detailed account of how conflicts around the Guwahati hill settlements have unfolded over the decades since independence. Broadly, the thesis demonstrates how the specificities of a regional social and political formation, and its history or urbanization, shape struggles around urban informal settlements.

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